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In Aftermath of Suit's End, Mike Wallace Reflects

By PETER W. KAPLAN

Mike Wallace said yesterday that the ordeal of being a defendant in Gen. William C. Westmoreland's \$120 million libel suit against CBS over a Vietnam documentary had underscored the danger of spreading himself too thin and that it would be some time before he did another documentary.

But the 67-year-old CBS correspondent — who narrated the documentary that prompted the lawsuit, "The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception," but was not required to testify at the trial because of the out-of-court settlement between CBS and General Westmoreland — said he disagreed with the general's characterization of himself and Mr. Wallace yesterday as "victims of circumstances."

"I don't feel a liaison with him as a victim of circumstance," Mr. Wallace said. "I am proud of the documentary. Far from being a victim of circumstances, we received in court a vindication of the accuracy of the documentary."

On the first day in nearly five months when he was not preoccupied with the progress of the libel suit, Mr. Wallace — craggy, tired and considering a vacation — was nevertheless flashing a large smile to the succession of co-workers passing the plate-glass wall of his "60 Minutes" office on West 57th Street and waving congratulations for the settlement.

'Too Much on My Plate'

"I don't think that as long as I'm working on a broadcast that takes so much time and attention as '60 Minutes,'" he said, "that I would take the time and energy to do another 'The Uncounted Enemy: A Vietnam Deception.' I had too much on my plate."

But Mr. Wallace said his split concentration between the documentary and his "60 Minutes" work had "nothing to do with the accuracy of the documentary." He said he would have preferred to work on the 90-minute documentary as he did with his "60 Minutes" reports — which are about 15 minutes long — "in which I do all the interviews, or at least 99.44 percent of

them. And I didn't here. I did about 5 of the 13 on the program."

That, Mr. Wallace said, "cost the broadcast my full and undivided attention." He compared this to previous projects, among them several other "CBS Reports" documentaries in which he did all the interviews and spent considerable time in the editing room. He said that he planned to devote next season exclusively to "60 Minutes" but that he was "by no means" through with documentaries.

It is not unusual on documentaries for a correspondent like Mr. Wallace to ask questions researched and prepared by others. But some people familiar with the workings of television news and documentaries express doubt that correspondents will be able to control documentaries in which they participate.

Correspondents with celebrity standing, like Mr. Wallace, might be able to influence the content of documentaries, but it remains to be seen, in the view of many familiar with television production, how much time even the best-intentioned correspondents can devote to carefully checking all the material they are presented with.

George Crile, the producer of the Vietnam documentary and a defendant in the case, is acknowledged by Mr. Wallace and others as the chief force behind the program. Because he taped an off-the-record interview without informing the subject, Mr. Crile was suspended by CBS for six months, after which he devoted full time to defense of the lawsuit.

Mr. Wallace said yesterday that he had come to know Mr. Crile "pretty well" during the trial.

"I would be perfectly confident working with him on a '60 Minutes' piece," Mr. Wallace said. "In fact, I'd like to do just that."

Mr. Wallace once more denied that he had "ambushed" General Westmoreland, as the general has charged. "On my first phone call to the general I informed him specifically of what I was going to do," Mr. Wallace said. "I told him it was going to be a 'CBS Reports' that would be longer than the ordinary program, and would be an attempt to understand the performance of American intelligence during the war."

"Then," he said, "I turned him over to George."

"In my estimation," Mr. Wallace said, "General Westmoreland got a fair shake. He was our commander in Vietnam and he knew the turf a great deal better than I did. We got from General Westmoreland an interview with a great deal of truth. He was just caught out. I am a grown man. If I get caught out by being candid, I don't have much to complain about."

Nevertheless, he said, despite the months of rancor and contention, he and the general have a "civilized relationship" and spoke in court yesterday. The two plan to "sit down and talk," Mr. Wallace said.

Earlier in the day, he had left the United States Court House at Foley Square and was taken to a celebratory lunch at the "21" Club by, among others, the CBS anchorman Dan Rather and the "60 Minutes" producer Don Hewitt.

After the lunch, in a taxicab, Mr. Rather, grinning, turned and made a mock-gallant toast to Mr. Wallace. "To Mike," he said, "Congratulations. Your hide has never been thicker and your spine never straighter." Mr. Hewitt laughed, and Mr. Wallace smiled without mirth.